

SOCIAL NETWORKING REVISITED

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In as little as five years Social Networking has managed to invade our families, relationships, places of work and class rooms. On an almost daily basis, we are confronted with media reports warning against the risks associated with Social Networking sites. It is perhaps not surprising then that an American Management Association survey found that up to 50% of US IT departments are desperately trying to declare their offices Social Networking free zones by configuring their Firewalls and blocking URL's. A recent TechRepublic poll found that the number could be as high as 71%.

I'm reminded of a poem by Robert Frost: "...Before I built a wall, I'd ask to know what I was walling in or out..." Before we argue about the virtues and evils of this new toy called Social Networking we might be best served to stand back and look at what Social Networking (aka Facebook) really is, and consider if blocking Social Networking sites will really limit the impact they have on our businesses.

The activities of Social Networking (relationship initiation) and Social Network (relationship maintenance) have been around long before social scientist started using these terms in the 1930's to describe and map human relationships. The ability of an individual to connect with another arbitrary person anywhere in the world captivated the general public in late 1960's when Stanley Milgran published his work named "The Small world theory", this theory was later expanded on by Duncan Watts and became known as "Six degrees of separation". Human civilisation it seem, requires and for a large part exists due to the ability of separate and unique individuals to create and expand their social groups, thus increasing their individual knowledge base, opportunities and the collective wisdom of the community at large.

Throughout history people were quick to utilise the emergent technologies and tools of their day to expand their Social Networks. In the 17th century a more reliable postal service aided Academics associated with the Royal Society of London to form a letter exchange community. The printing press Reprinted with permission ASA. This article first appeared in Accountancy SA February 2010 p 36 – 37, it is also available online at www.accountancysa.org.za

helped to create what is known as Invisible Colleges throughout continental Europe. International telegraph and telephone lines made interaction with individuals and communities across the globe possible. It is not surprising perhaps then, that scientists, Starr Hilts and Murray Turoff, started hypothesising in 1978 about the possibility to connect individual computers to form non-local communities, which later grew into what is today the Internet.

Social Networking using the Internet started with e-mail, mailing lists, bulletin board services, Internet forums and newsgroups. Social Computing services emerged together with the World Wide Web in the 1990's. Despite the gawkiness of these initial attempts at Social Networking using the Internet, Social Networking has become extremely profitable and popular, with many social networking sites such as MySpace reporting more page views than Google. The technology responsible for this new evolution of Social Networking is Web2.0 (second generation Web-based platforms designed to aid online collaboration and user-generated content sharing).

Social Networking, Social Networking 2.0, Web2.0, Virtual Communities, E-communities, Online Communities, Social Networking software, Social Computing, Collaboration Software, Enterprise Social software, Enterprise 2.0, and a myriad of names such as Facebook, MySpace, Tweeter, Mxit etc., are some of the terms used by the public and academics to describe the new wave of Web experiences. Due to the fact that these terms are not properly defined they can mean different things in different contexts and to different users. For example electronic social networking can incorporate Web2.0 technologies or it can be seen as a form of Web 2.0 technology. All Social Networking applications are not equal however and it is important to note that some applications might incorporate only a limited number of Social Networking tools, a fact that needs to be taken into account if you choose to invest in a Social Networking platform for your business, or if you want to design proper security measures to address the risks associated with Social Networking applications.

Stove Boyd a well known blogger (www.stoveboyd.com) on Social Networking 2.0 writes that Social Networking applications should create and manage a digital expression of people's personal relationships and links, by offering address book updates and viewable profiles. These applications

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should also aid in the identification and conversion of potential ties into weak or strong ties by providing “introduction services” and allowing users to display their knowledge, experience and expertise in a searchable format.

The basic components that should be present to comply with these criteria can be summarised as follows:

- The application must build a digital expression of personal relationships and links.
- It must aid in the discovery of potential ties, and
- It should aid in the conversion of potential ties into weak and strong ties.

Mark Granovetter, one of the most influential social theorists since the 1970’s described how all individuals are surrounded by a network of strong, weak and potential ties. It is important to remember that all of these individual ties in turn form the centre of their own network also consisting out of strong, weak and potential ties.

Professor Andrew McAfee noted in his blog (<http://andrewmcafee.org/>) that strong ties are usually a relatively small group of close collaborators, people with whom an individual has strong professional ties and are usually located within the same line of service with similar specialist knowledge.

The advantages of maintaining these strong ties include:

- The speed and flow of information
- Trust, credibility and influence. The degree of safety in these relationships promotes learning and creativity.
- Strong ties have greater motivation to be of assistance.
- Timely access to that person is more easily obtained.

Weak ties can be described as limited purpose loose relationships, co-workers and professional acquaintances. In hierarchical organisations, where knowledge workers are grouped together in specialist lines of service or processes, these weak ties becomes more important, in order to be able

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to gain access to specialist knowledge and information present in other social networks (lines of service). Access to other networks is important due to the fact that strong ties tend to move in the same circles, and the information they receive tend to overlap with what the knowledge worker already knows.

Brown and Duguid, in their book: *The Social Life of Information*, noted that the advantages of maintaining weak ties include:

- Access to information, opportunities and resources that could lead to new innovation.
- Peers engaged in other lines of service can provide valuable resources for each other.
- Weak ties can also for a limited source of vouching for each other.

Potential ties can be defined as those relationships that lack substantial significance, also known as “nodding” relationships. Professor McAfee notes that these relationships could be valuable to knowledge workers if only they knew about their knowledge and expertise.

Advantages of being able to access these potential ties include:

- The sharing of knowledge, progress on similar problems and answering of questions.
- Sharing knowledge on resources, vendors, consultants, external partners, potential joint ventures and subcontracting opportunities outside the organisation.

The digital expression of one’s social network created in Social Networking platforms allow users to interact with their strong ties with which they will have frequent contact and exchanges. It also allows them to easily locate and keep track of other ties which they might find useful at a future date, without having to spend additional time and resources in the maintenance of these weaker connections.

In order for an individual to determine whether he wishes to create a connection with another person he will require some form of social feedback. Social feedback is essential in the formation of a digital reputation which users will use to help to determine if a person possesses the knowledge, experience and expertise he claims to have, and whether the creation of a weak or a strong tie with that

individual would be advantageous. The calibre of followers and friends linked to your profile (people who are willing to be associated with you in public) increases your standing in the social network.

Traditional communication methods employed on the Internet utilised communication channels where information are communicated top-down or in one direction. The emphasis of Web 2.0 applications and Social Networking 2.0 platforms lies with two-way conversations where all participants have the opportunity to participate and share opinions and knowledge. The following modes of computer mediated communication should be present in Social Networking 2.0 platforms:

- a) One-on-one (e.g. e-mail, instant messaging for private and confidential communications);
- b) One-to-many or one-to-few (e.g. web pages and blogs); and/or
- c) Many-to-many or few-to-few (e.g. wikis and whiteboards).

The integration of these different modes of computer mediated communication into one application allows users to aggregate information in a more efficient manner, it makes information and communications more persistent and allows easy retrieval and sharing of knowledge.

The definition and components of Social Networking 2.0 can be summarised in the following table:

Criteria:	Component:
1. Support social networking (Must contain all three components)	1. Build a digital expression of people’s personal relationships and links.
	2. Aid in the discovery of potential ties.
	3. Aid in conversion of potential ties into weak or strong ties.
2. Support two or more modes of computer mediated communication (Must contain at least two components)	1. One-on-one
	2. One-to-many / one-to-few
	3. Many-to-many / few-to-few
3. Allow social feedback	Contributions by a member are rated by other users.

Social Networking 2.0 can have a positive and negative impact on organizations. The sources of these effects can be found within or outside the organisational control.

A company can deploy Social Networking 2.0 applications within their own firewalls and utilize it to communicate and share knowledge within the organisation or open their firewall and use it to communicate with customers, suppliers and designated third parties. Employees can use office resources to access Social Networking 2.0 applications, or they can use their private home internet connections, cell phones, or other devices to engage in private Social Networking activities. Ex-employees, dissatisfied customers and legions of unknown and unconnected internet users can use Social Networking 2.0 platforms to discuss and criticize the organisation, its employees and products.

In Robert Frost's poem the Wall he concluded that good walls make for good neighbours. Due to the scope of Social Networking activities it creates new challenges to our traditional concepts of IT risk management. Social Networking platforms are still in its infancy and dismissing the potential of applications based on the overwhelming majority of entertainment-centric gadgets might be premature. Whether Social Networking 2.0 should remain on the other side of the virtual wall will be discussed further in future articles.

Suggested further reading:

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